

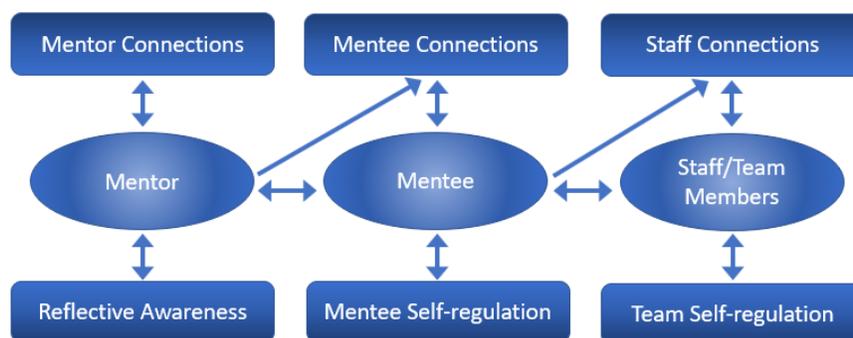
Creating a Mentoring Program to Move More Women into Leadership Roles

By Ann N. Gatty, Ph.D.

To be successful in today's ever-changing business environment, companies must constantly evolve. Research indicates that having a diverse workforce produces greater innovation and boosts the bottom line. Such diversity includes women, yet many women find it difficult to move into leadership roles. A structured workplace mentoring program can help remove the barriers that women experience, while providing much needed assistance in their professional development.

While informal mentoring is more common, given business' emotionally charged atmosphere, mentoring is best accomplished as a structured, embedded program in an organization. Our suggested mentorship model is designed to address the barriers women experience that hinder their growth and development. Such barriers that have been articulated include (1) a sense of isolation when there is only one woman at the table, (2) lack of support after receiving a promotion, (3) few female role models are available and (4) flexibility with addressing home responsibilities is often promised but falls through.

We introduce the Steps Forward Program™ which is a triadic mentoring and socializing process to develop self-awareness, self-confidence and problem-solving abilities. In this model, the mentor pairs with a mentee to assist the behavior of the mentee so that the mentee correctly assists her team members. In other words, the mentor and mentee join to assist the mentee in learning how to lead her direct reports. In a triadic model, the mentors' target of concern is two positions away, assisting the mentee in acquiring the leadership skills necessary to lead her team members. Ideally, every individual in the organization should be assisting others starting with the CEO mentoring down through the front-line personnel.



In this mentoring model, there are three methods of assisting the mentee: (1) formal supervising mentor, (2) informal other connections, and (3) mentee self-instruction. When learning anything new, an individual has a starting point based on what she can perform without assistance. To build on that skill level, she needs assistance from a more capable peer to perform this more advanced skill. She then becomes able to move from outside mentor assistance to internalize assistance—or self-instruction. At which point she can perform this more skilled task without assistance. This is what the Soviet psychologist, Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934), calls the Zone of Proximal Development. Everyone has a range of what they can do without assistance and what they can do with assistance. This is the sweet spot, or zone, that is ripe for learning new skill levels and should be the mentoring focus.

Here's how our **Steps Forward Program™** works to assure positive results are achieved.

Step One:

The mentor and mentee create a written contract identifying the mission or set of new skills that is wanted by the mentee. Especially for women, the mentoring process should always include improving self-awareness, self-confidence and problem-solving abilities in addition to other selected leadership skills. Secondly, the pair must define how they will work to meet their goal. Thirdly, they will describe how the mentee will feel as new skills are honed.

Step Two

As the mentor and mentee begin the process, there will be opportunities for the mentee to meet with other leaders within the organization that the mentor suggests who might offer a broader perspective about leadership roles. Such an approach allows the mentoring process to be more manageable for an already time-strapped mentor. It also allows the mentee to experience more diversity in leadership strategies. However, the mentor remains the developmental partner throughout the program timeframe.

Step Three

A fundamental aspect of the Steps Forward Program™ is that the mentee moves from reliance on the mentor for assistance in learning new skills to relying on herself to hone the leadership skills. By becoming more self-reliant and self-aware, the mentee knows what skills she can perform effectively and what skills still need improvement. The ongoing conversations between mentor and mentee reveal how the skill development is progressing and what she can now perform with self-talk or which she has automated. The conversations also can act as a learning opportunity for the mentor to gauge how the mentee is successfully leading her direct reports and what additional assistance she needs.

Step Four

In the Steps Forward Program™, an established timeframe keeps the mentorship focused on outcomes. By meeting regularly, progress can be monitored, and goals can be modified if necessary. This process improves the standard employee review assessments often completed annually and allows for immediate feedback. Once the mentee has met the contracted outcomes and the skills are capably performed, a new mentoring exercise can be established building on the previous work. This is especially helpful when a mentee is promoted to a new position, knowing she will continue to receive support.

By establishing a formal mentoring program, an organization can attract talent, knowing that there is an embedded professional development program in place. Also, by developing a program that provides a mechanism for leaders to observe competent leadership behavior, the need for women to overprepare their work will diminish. Women will not have to find ways to get in front of leadership to be noticed. They should have confidence in that.

For further information contact Dr. Ann Gatty, ann@strategicpeoplesolutions.com